

Burnout and health promotion in veterinary medicine

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Burnout is on the rise among the helping professions such as human and veterinary medicine, and negatively affects personal and professional wellbeing, and the provision of quality care to clients and animals. Even more significant is that veterinarians are reported to have the highest incidence rate of suicide among all occupations, and twice as high as physicians and dentists (1). Indeed, 85% of American Veterinary Medical Association convention attendees indicated that stress and burnout (includes compassion fatigue) were the most important wellness issues affecting the veterinary community (2). Seventy-six percent believed that there were not adequate resources to deal with wellness issues (2).

Much research attention is now being focused on the emotional exhaustion component of burnout, as it has been increasingly shown to be correlated with physical and mental health. Progress is also being made to relate other variables such as work/life conflict, and communications with burnout. A case in point was our research study among Canadian physicians. We found that having positive emotions and responsive communications with patients reduced burnout, but when difficult emotions were kept hidden or insincere, burnout increased (3). Of the 3 burnout dimensions, emotional exhaustion contributed to symptoms of strain. We also found that less experienced physicians reported higher stress levels than those who were more experienced, and female physicians reported higher stress than their male colleagues. Comparable findings are drawn for veterinary medicine in which Australian female veterinary surgeons and those with less experience also reported higher stress levels (4).

Many clients regard their companion animals as cherished family members; consequently, they have high expectations that emotional and medical needs will be met (5). Recognition of the human-companion animal bond is the very core of the *bond-centered approach* for veterinary practice. It involves recognizing and responding to the unique emotional interchange,

in a way that benefits all of the participants involved (6). Thus, good communication is likely to result in strong client relationships, and an indicator of those more likely to follow treatment recommendations (5–6).

To be engaging and responsive to clients often involves intense and constant emotions, along with other forms of verbal and non-verbal communications. This is no easy task, as the skills needed to manage people and emotions, emotionally volatile clients, and the feelings that arise from euthanization require practice, time, and patience (4,7). This deep form of caring has a potential to be a risk factor for compassion fatigue and burnout if mental, spiritual, and emotional balance is not maintained (1). Compassion fatigue then is the emotional burden that occurs as the result of continued and excessive exposure to traumatic events that patients and families experience (8).

How can veterinary practices provide bond-centered care yet prevent burnout and/or compassion fatigue?

Effective health promotion strategies need to be implemented to reduce the risk factors for burnout and compassion fatigue, and should include efforts from the organizational, practice/collegial, and individual levels (7).

Organizations can provide resources such as lifelong learning and continuing professional development workshops. Much can also be done by the individual to develop the resilience and emotional competence needed to keep compassion fatigue at bay (8). Adaptive coping strategies are a key component of a health promotion strategy. A problem-focused strategy involves tackling problems that give rise to stress, and an emotion-focused strategy works on normalizing feelings that arise from stress (9). For example, emotion-focused strategies that Brenda frequently uses are to listen to music, burn incense, enjoy coffee/tea, turn on area lighting, stroke our pets, and walk outdoors, all of which stimulate the senses and help to minimize harmful stress.

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